

## DUALITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *BETWEEN THE ASSASSINATIONS*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to explore how Aravind Adiga's second book *Between the Assassinations* (2008), delineates an odyssey of Indian society from aspirations to disillusionment in the wake of IT Revolution. The entire fiction raises very crucial and binary issues of national importance such as poverty, hunger, master-servant relationship, corruption, communal disharmony, violence, religious fanaticism, terrorism, child labor, economic, political, and social exploitation and discrimination of the weaker, marginalized section on the basis of caste, class, gender and religion. The paper depicts how Adiga presents a satirical critique of the individual vices such as hypocrisy, faithlessness, duality, treachery, greed, ego and arrogance in one's social status based on copiousness, rotten caste, social, religious, and political systems of the nation that are working together for degeneration of human values and leads to the ever increasing gap between the Big Bellies and the Small Bellies in Indian society as a whole.

**KEYWORDS:** The Big Bellies and the Small Bellies, Discrimination, Corruption, Exploitation, Communal Disharmony

### INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga occupies an important place among the young Indian writers with his debut novel *The White Tiger* that bagged the Man Booker Prize in 2008. The present paper deals with his second book *Between the Assassinations*, a collection of inter-linked short stories set in Kittur on the South-western coast of India during the period of seven years of transition between the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi viz. 1984 to 1991. The fiction probes into the sense and sensibilities of the people between these two tragedies that shocked the nation. To execute this self imposed task, Adiga has chosen fictitious place i.e. Kittur, as a tool to expose the bitter reality of the power struggle between the poor and the rich, various castes and creeds, and communal affiliations. The book is a triumph of the voice and imagination. It focuses on rising communalism and economic prosperity. The characters portrayed in the collection represent almost every section of Indian society.

Adiga exposes the life of a town dominated by fearful contrasts between wealth and squalor. *Between the Assassinations* is a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of India and highlights its religio-socio-political conflicts encapsulated in humour and irony. The range of social status is wide – from the rich, filling their leisure with reading porn, to the poor who are not sure about their next meal. Peter Parker in *Times Online* rightly states about Adiga's second book as: "Adiga is at his best when describing the everyday realities of village people who escape to a big city, or are sent there by their families and end up living on the streets and doing the most menial jobs"(vii). The first story of Ziauddin, an innocent twelve years old Muslim boy, belongs to a farm labouring family and works in an Ideal tea stall run by Ramanna Shetty. He suffers from a sense of isolation as he is poor and he has to struggle

for his survival like. The story is the reflection of child labour, prevalent in our society which is an outcome of extreme poverty and marginalization of the downtrodden. Eventually he is a plaything in the hands of a rich Muslim Pathan terrorist that exhibits the marginalized psyche of the poor innocent boy caught in the tension of Hindu-Muslim issue i.e. communalism and poverty. The terrorist also exploits the poor Muslim children even on refusal of Ziauddin to do the work he was abused and tortured by the foreign terrorist as: "There are fifty thousand Muslims in this town.' Every one of them seethes. Every one of them is ready for action. I was only offering this job to you out of pity. Because I see what the Indians have done to you. Otherwise I would have offered the job to any of these fifty thousand fellows" (19). The writer does a decent job of describing the divide between the haves and have-nots and the way the servant-class is treated. Hirish Sawhney in "India: A View from Below" describes the servant-master relationship as:

The servant-master system implies two things: One is that the servants are far poorer than the rich- a servant has no possibility of ever catching up to the master. And secondly, he has access to the master- the master's money, the master's physical person. Yet crime rates in India are very low. Even though the middle class- who often have three or four servants- or paranoid about crime, the reality is the master, getting killed by his servant is rare.... You need two things (for crime to occur) – a divide and a conscious ideology of resentment. We don't have resentment in India. The poor just assume that the rich a fact of life.... But I think we're seeing what I believe is a class-based resentment for the first time. (229-45)

*Between the Assassinations* opens with the description of the train station that highlights the master- servant relationship as: "None of the other shopkeeper's near the railway station would hire a Muslim but Ramanna Shetty, who ran The ideal store, a tea and samosa plates, told Ziauddin it was okay for him to stay"(3). When Ziauddin's master Ramanna Shetty caught him red-handed stealing a samosa, and punished him as: "Ramanna grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him to the ground, kicked him and then shoved him out of the teashop while the other boys huddled together and watched impassively, as sheep do watching one of their flock being shorn" (8). Sarita Singh in her critical paper "Contextual Antithesis in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*" presents a pathetic picture of people belonging to different castes and classes live with a sort of fear in Kittur and writes:

Aravind Adiga's stories *Between the Assassinations* focuses on the disillusionment with the liberal democracy in India. Despite inheritance of rich history and culture, colossal identity and diversity of language, we are moving towards a fragmentation, loss of reality and depthlessness because corruption has proliferated in all areas of social and political experience. There is rage against cumulative impact of numerous flaws in Indian society, predominantly prejudiced against and discrimination due to gender, religion, caste and class. (200)

Since Adiga's *The White Tiger* is much talked about the theme of poverty, corruption, caste and religion can be better traced in his *Between the Assassinations*. Another evil widely prevalent and deeply entrenched is that of corruption upon which Adiga throws light in a few stories. The story 'The Bunder' is a journey to the Muslim dominated area i.e. the Bunder, has the highest crime rate in Kittur. Abbasi is a god fearing Muslim businessman. He shuts down his golden shirt factory because of corruption as well as the embroidery work on the shirts damages the eyes of the employees. Abbasi is demoralized enough to pay bribe to the corrupt officials, as he is a simple minded man vulnerable to the attacks of idealism. Adiga has raised a voice against the corruption of bureaucrats as: "A man has to eat these days, Mr. Abbasi. And prices are rising so fast. Ever since Mrs. Gandhi died, this country began falling apart" (26). Adiga describes the rate of corruption in India as: "Corruption. There is no end to it in this country. In the past four months, since he had decided to

reopen his shirt factory, he had had to pay off:" (27). Further he exposes the corrupt political parties, the departments and the high officials involved in practice of bribery and with whom he has to negotiate as:

The electricity man; the water board man; half the income tax department of Kittur; half the excise department of Kittur; six different officials of the telephone board; a land tax official of the Kittur City Corporation; a sanitary inspector from the Karnataka State Health Board; a health inspector from the Karnataka State Sanitation Board; a delegation of the All India Small Factory Workers' Union; delegations of the Kittur Congress party, the Kittur BJP, the Kittur Communist Party and the Kittur Muslim League. (28).

Sunil Shetty remarks explicitly the rank of India in corruption as: "black-marketing, counterfeiting corruption, we are the world champions. If they were included in Olympic Games, India would always win gold, silver and bronze in those three" (30). Abbasi, disappointed at Rajiv Gandhi's leadership, pours out his frustration and says: "Corruption. It's like a demon sitting on my brain eating it with a fork and knife" (32). Bipan Chandra in "Run-up to the New Millenium and After" writes: "Corruption at the lower level of the bureaucracy was an issue of everyday concern for all citizens rich or poor, and it was widely felt that high-level corruption created conditions of legitimacy for the lower-level variety" (361). Adiga's fiction unlocks Indian mind-set about corruption which is prevalent in full swing in the country. Everybody curses corruption but not a single fellow has found a way to slay the demon without giving up his share of the loot of corruption. The Professor remarks: "We need one man to stand up to them. 'Just one honest, brave man. That fellow would do more for this country than Gandhi or Nehru did" (Ibid-32).

Mr. D'Mello, the strict, orthodox, highly idealistic teacher at St Alfonso's Boys' High School feels deep resentment by the corruption in post-independent India and the depravity of the young generation. This terrible 'mix up' takes place because the Angel Talkies has bribed the 'bloody' politicians. Mr. Pundit, a Kannada language teacher affirms: "This is no mix-up, it's deliberate! The Angel Talkies has bribed all those bloody politicians in Bangalore, so they'd send our boys to a House of Sin!" (87). When Mr. D 'Mello's dearest student and sole comfort Girish desires to see pornographic pictures, the teacher frowns at Girish and speaks of things that makes his blood boil: "Once India had been ruled by three foreigners: England, France, and Portugal. Now their place was taken by three native-born thugs: Betrayal, Bungling, and Backstabbing. The problem is here' - he tapped his ribs" (102).

Kittur has memorials of riots, violence, corruption and psychological repression is the site of resistance and defiance too. It is evident in the story of a Dalit bookseller known as 'Xerox' Ramakrishna, son of a sweeper, makes his living by selling pirated copies by greasing the hands of the police quite now and then. When he is caught selling Rushdie's banned book 'Satanic Verses', the upper caste Inspector takes pleasure in breaking his legs, though Xerox pleads ignorance of the ban on the book. The conditions in jail and corruption of the police force reflect the sorry state of the judiciary of India. India has always been a land where extremes of wealth and poverty have existed side by side. Ancient social inequalities still persist. The author explores the ways, the marginalized face the oppression of the rich class i.e. the big bellies. Injustice and inequality has always been around us. Social discontent and violence has been on the rise. The present paper reflects that *Between the Assassinations* tries to highlight the great duality in India. Nona Walia in *Times of India* writes that Adiga in his debut novel uses the metaphor "Men with big Bellies" and "Men with small Bellies" to capture "the duality (feast or famine) of human existence in India today" (v). The men with big bellies representing feast are the denizens of an 'India of Light' while the men with small bellies are forbidden to taste the flavour of feast, comes from 'India of Darkness'. The ever widening gap between the rich and the poor and the economic system that lets

the small minority to prosper at the expense of the majority has been laid threadbare in Adiga's fiction. Xerox's open rebellion shows the poor-rich divide and at the same time it depicts that the poor will no longer bear insults. The act of Xerox poses a question for India that has failed to establish social equality between the men with big bellies and the men with small bellies. Adiga underlines the fact that unless social attitudes change, no amount of quotas will lend dignity to the downtrodden. In 'Day Five' Jayamma's story sounds similar to that of Ziauddin in 'The Train Station' as a teenager she was put on a bus and sent off to work in someone's house as a cook or cleaner. Jayamma is a poor unmarried Brahmin woman in her fifties, belongs to upper caste of society but she was born in rags:

In the space of twelve years her dear mother had given birth to eleven children. Nine of them had been girls. Yes nine!! Now that's trouble. By the time Jayamma was born, number eight, there was no milk in her mother's breasts – they had to feed her an ass's milk in a plastic bottle ... her father had saved enough gold only for six daughters to be married off ; the last three had to remain barren virgins for life. (230).

Jayamma's story reveals a pathetic picture of Indian poverty that makes the reader think on the fate of such servants that document the deep-rooted divisions based on caste in Indian society. Shaila the little lower caste servant girl in the advocate's house gets married only after her master sends money to her parents. Though Jayamma and Shaila both were servants in the same house but still Jayamma loathed Shaila for being a lower caste. On being asked by Shaila whether she will leave the advocate's house for real, Jayamma reacted as: "You lower caste demon! Jayamma hissed. Mind your manners!"(231). Replying to the query on poverty, internal unrest and terrorism in India, to the *Independent* Adiga said:

These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that's caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The flare-ups can often take the form of ethnic or regional protests, but the underlying grievances are often economic: Fixing the economic disparities has to be part of any attempt to address India's growing unrest. The country's intelligence and police agencies need to be reformed and modernized; right now they seem behind the terrorists. (ix).

In India, the caste in which one is born gives him an identity in the society. It may be an identity of pride or humiliation. A person is recognized on the basis of his birth rather than his deeds. Unlike Xerox, Shankara Kinni, in the next story thus retaliates. The tragedy of Shankara who is half-caste speaks of the rigid stratification of the caste system in Indian society. Shankara a lower caste boy embittered by rejection from all sides takes revenge against the caste biased society that gives rise to poor- rich divide. He is ill-treated in the society to the extent that he: "saw his friend's mother with a cleaning rag in her left hand. She had begun wiping the sofa where he had been sitting" (66). He unveiled the bitter truth as: "I have burst a bomb to end the 5,000-year-old caste system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that no man should be judged, as I have been, merely by the accident of his birth" (57). Shankara is involved in caste conflict and thinks as: "I have the worst of both the castes in my blood, Shankara thought, lying in bed, the receiver of the phone still at his ear. I have the anxiety and fear of the Brahmin, and I have the tendency to act without thinking of the Hoyka. In me the worst of both has fused and produced this monstrosity which is my personality" (74). The author highlights the disparities between the poor and the rich as well as the class-caste conflicts through these characters. It seems to the reader that caste and class discriminations are two sides of the same coin. Within the upper castes the poor remains poor; he cannot equal with the other counterparts who are rich. It is evident in the case of Jayamma

who works as a cook and has to suffer from the perpetual misery though she belongs to a Brahmin family.

One may be born poor, but he does everything to rise upwards. He works with a hope that makes his life meaningful. The rich do not treat him in equal terms. It is evident in the story of lower-caste George D'Souza, the mosquito- man who wins the heart of an upper caste lady, Mrs. Gomes. He recognizes that he will always be treated as a poor as: "the biggest difference is, between being rich and being like us? The rich can make mistake again and again. We make only one mistake, and that's it for us" (258). George also shares the bitter truth with his friend Guru: "Oh, these rich people are all the same, George said, bitterly. We're just trash to them. A rich woman can never see a poor man as a man. Just as a servant"(280). All these statements by George D'Souza mirror the catharsis of the poor fellows and the conflict between the rich and the poor, and at the same time reveal how poverty becomes a curse for the poor.

The next story of the two poor orphan brothers Keshava and Vittal, also presents a heart-rending picture of poverty and the ever widening gap between haves and have-nots as India steps into the era of liberalization and privatization. The two brothers went to the shopkeeper in city, just expecting that he would take care of them. The rich shopkeeper feels proud and important murmurs as: "Everyday people come from villages, looking for work. Everyone thinks that we are in the towns can support them for nothing. As if we have no stomachs of our own to feed" (119). Similar things are focused in the story of the young children of an addicted labourer, Soumya and Raju, who beg to buy drugs for their father. It is very touching to know that Soumya begs and buys a drug for her father who beats her finally for a hundred rupee note which she had not got from the foreigner. Soumya takes her small brother out on the road for begging: "She heard the woman with the gold hands say to someone else in the car: There are beggars everywhere these days in the town. It never used to be like this" (218).

The story of Mrs. Engineer, Mr. Ganesh Pai, owner of furniture shop and his poor servant, Chenayya also foregrounds class divide, inequality and formidable barrier between master and servant, gives rise to poor- rich divide in India. Enraged Chenayya shouts as: "Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor. There is no hope for us, and no need of pity"(193). At times there is moral, social and political degradation in India. The next story focuses on the luxurious life of a childless rich couple Giridhar Rao and Kamini, that brings out the gulf that separates India of beggars and affluent India of elite Raos, Mr Murthy, Mrs. Karvars, builders, officers and looters. The upper class couple seeks refuge in his circle of inmates so that they may escape loneliness and avoid inner conflicts. Murali's father had lost all his land by socialist policies of the Congress government that promised compensation. But some bureaucrat had taken the money by forgery. Reflecting on this Murali introspected as: "my old man deserves this. I deserve this. For all that we have done to the poor, this is fit retribution. He realized, of course, that his family's compensation had not been stolen by the poor, but by some corrupt civil servant. Nevertheless this was justice of a kind" (333).

Gururaj Kamath, the protagonist of the story 'Angel Talkies' stands for truth and honesty. He was born and had matured in Kittur but the true colours of Kittur is revealed to him when a Gurkha tells him the Hindu-Muslim riots were not due to religious conflict between the two communities but the grim ground reality is: "The violence was planned. Muslim goons burned Muslim shops and Hindu goons burned Hindu shops. It was real estate transaction masquerading as a religious riot" (162). The story makes one think: "it is a false earth I am walking on. An innocent man is behind bars and a guilty man walks free. Everyone knows this is so not one has the courage to change it" (165). Arundhati Roy writes in her essay 'Peace is War': "neoliberal capitalists control democracies by reducing the press, parliament and judiciary to commodities that are available to the highest bidder" (87-112). Some parallels that recur in *The White Tiger* are focused in

the stories. In 'Angel Talkies' the richest man of the town Mr. Engineer forced his poor employee to give the police a sworn affidavit to own up the accidental killing by the drunkard boss and further Mr. Engineer bribed the judge and police and gets the identity of the killer car changed as: "Then Mr. Engineer gave the judge six thousand rupees, and the police something less, perhaps four thousand or five, because the judiciary is of course more noble than the police, to keep quiet. Then he wants... to change the identity of the killer car to a Fiat, and he has his car back and he's driving around town again" (159). The story 'Bajpe' delineates the merciless destruction of the beautiful forest of Bajpe also known as the 'lungs' of Kittur. It points to the massive deforestation unleashed in the 80s and 90s by greedy men in power, multinational corporations and land developers, creating the demon of pollution and spiritual wasteland.

## CONCLUSIONS

Adiga focusing his mind on the poor and the underprivileged, chiefly points the conflict between the wealth and the poverty, the master and the servant, the upper caste and the lower caste and the powerful and the powerless. He makes the reader aware of the disparities between the poor and the rich, corruption, caste-class conflict, communal disharmony and violence. Furthermore he seems to suggest us to liberate the society from the ever widening gap between the Big Bellies and the Small Bellies that are eating into the very core of Indian society. We have to understand the marginalized including the exploitation of the weak, images of the poor downtrodden who are consumed, exhausted, mitigated and sacked. In 'Spectator Book Club' Lee Langley proves the point to the hilt that *Between the Assassinations* is perfectly "a Dickensian dark view of child labour, corruption, poverty and ruthless privilege in modern India."

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